

THE FAILURE OF MODERN TRAGEDY ON THE STAGE.

From the London Saturday Review.

That the tragedies of modern poets, when produced on the stage, fail to excite the sympathies of the audience—that even the best are received with dissatisfaction, not only by the many, but perhaps in a still greater degree by the few—is now almost among the platitudes of criticism. The fact is recognized, but there is still disagreement with regard to its cause.

No doubt—to mention one among the many causes of the fact—a deeper appreciation of the more subtle beauties of poetry has grown among us, and with it an always increasing demand that none of these beauties shall be lost in the representation. We desire to see the conclusions at which we ourselves have arrived through careful study confirmed in the actor's conception and execution of his part; or, if there is some character in the piece which we in our reading have felt ourselves unable to grasp, completely, we expect that the actor will throw strength and light upon it, and help us to understand it better. That such expectations are in general disappointed, most of us have learnt by experience. One or two characters may, it is possible, realize our wishes; we may find our ideal in the actor's representation; we may learn something that will enlarge our ideal or give us a better in its place. It is ideal that even the most skillful actors satisfy us entirely; but they often provide us with useful suggestions, and direct our attention to what may otherwise have escaped our notice; and we will grant that, when we see a great tragedy performed by a good company, we are pleased as a whole with one or two of the characters. This, however, is the utmost that we can reasonably expect; at the best, the greater part of the play will be mangled by gaucherie and ignorance; and we shall return home saying, as we and others may often have said before, that the best stage for a great play is the reader's own mind. His conception may be sadly inadequate, but there is at any rate more harmony and completeness in it than he can hope to find in a theatrical representation.

This may in part explain the fact that few thoughtful men witness tragedy on the modern English stage with unmixed enjoyment. But the reasoning applies no less to the plays of Shakespeare than to the plays of modern poets. Shakespeare is still produced with some success—will only partially succeed, it is true, but with greater success than the best plays of our later poets. We want some theory which will account for the complete failure on the stage of works like Mr. Browning's *Hob in the Southeon* and *Stuffed*. That the fault, if there be any fault, is not entirely on the side of the public is sufficiently evident, since it does not altogether refuse a hearing to Shakespeare. Let us consider what there is in such plays which distinguishes them from the Elizabethan drama, and prevents them from gaining the public ear at all.

The question has often been debated; and it has often been settled by an appeal to that most dangerous and fallacious of canons, "poetical inspiration of the highest order, is impossible in an age of criticism." When the first unsuccess of efforts of genius have ceased, we are told, man begins to analyze that which he has accomplished; and the principle that prompts him to analyze once within him, he can no longer create—poetry in the most elevated sense of the word is at an end. The poet will no longer write what will awaken the sympathies of his fellow-men, educated and uneducated alike. The vigorous simplicity and unclouded truth which characterize the earliest poetry, and which every one can appreciate, have gone from among us. We shall still have poets; but they will not do more than write each for a more or less limited circle of readers, whereas the first poets wrote for the whole of humanity. This last statement is true. It is true that later poetry is less universal, in one sense of the word, than that which precedes it. The kind of universality or generality which arises from a comparative simplicity in the environment of the poet and his public, and which we find in the oldest poetry of the world, is generally lost as poetry continues its advance through higher stages of development. The arts diverge more and more from one another; they become more and more specialized; and as they increase in speciality, they proceed further from the kind of generality that we have mentioned, always however approaching another and higher kind of generality. The progress is from that universality which arises from the fact that the world in which the artist moves is still to a great degree homogeneous, to a knowledge of the infinite universal relations which determine and constitute the individual. How this bears upon the question of the failure of modern tragedies we shall see presently. It will be sufficient to remark here that the advance of the poetical art in the direction of greater speciality is not a matter of reproach; and, further, if it be so, that the growth of criticism is not to blame. The age of Shakespeare is in fact by no means marked by the absence of criticism. Its principles were indeed clearly understood that they are not in the present day; but the spirit of analysis—and this is what the reasoners of whom we have spoken declare to be identical to true poetry—was already in existence. The truth is that criticism is always attendant upon, and correlative to, artistic production. The earliest efforts are undoubtedly on the side of the artist, because there must be something to criticize before criticism is possible; but when criticism has once come into being, its development is on the whole parallel with that of the other arts. False canons of criticism may for a time arrest the progress of art, but there is no essential antagonism between criticism on the one side and poetry, painting, and music on the other; it is in general not only beneficial, but necessary.

It may be urged, on the other hand, that the greatest poets have always shown the greatest disregard for the laws laid down by critics. Whatever there is of truth in this, it may be remarked, applies as well to Shelley and Mr. Browning as to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. But the circumstance is not to be attributed to any irreconcilable feud between them and criticism as such. Creative genius has so often been united with great critical power in the same mind—we need not multiply instances; it will be sufficient to mention the names of Goethe, Lessing, and Coleridge—that it seems probable that the disagreement between great poets and their critics arises not from a necessary opposition between them, but from the fact that the former understand the true laws of criticism better than the professed critics themselves. The principles of criticism are obtained inductively, by an examination of the best existing works of art, of all countries and all ages. They are only provisional; they are false if they will not admit of modification and extension. When a genius arises, sending forth into the world new works of art, we have new in-

stances which must be included within our generalizations. It becomes necessary to amplify them. This work is often done by the poets themselves, sometimes by critics who are not poets. Very frequently, however, the critics refuse admission to the new cases, and there is war between the poet and the critic. The frequency of the last phenomenon has given rise to the notion that war is the only natural relation between them.

Since, then, the rise of the critical spirit is not to be blamed on the failure of modern tragedies on the stage, where are we to look for the true cause? It has already been hinted that the theory of development by continual differentiation will throw some light upon the question. Mr. Herbert Spencer has applied the theory to the early history of the fine arts in Greece. He has shown how poetry, music, and dancing flow from a common source—the monotonous chant accompanied by rude instruments to which in the earliest times men marched in procession to the altars of their gods; how they gradually became distinct, and received each a separate and parallel development, not, however, without acting and reacting upon one another continually; how poetry, having reached the comparatively high development which we find in the *Odyssey*, began itself to diverge in different directions, and how in this way lyrical poetry and the drama, both of which were potentially contained in the epic, obtained both an independent existence.

We see this principle at work throughout the history of art, if at least we do not confine our attention to short periods, but regard its development in any degree as a whole. If we compare, for instance, the English literature of the Elizabethan era with that of the nineteenth century, and more especially that portion of our literature which may be fairly comprehended under the drama, we shall see that many things, of which hitherto no adequate explanation has been given, may be explained as natural results of the law of progress of his time advance far beyond their predecessors in extending the range of dramatic writing. We find in their works that the distinction between tragedy and comedy has been established; most of the conventional characters which are repeated in the moral plays with little variation have been thrown aside; real characters, drawn from the experience of life, have in general taken the place of the deities and the virtues and the vices of earlier poets; art has separated itself from religion and morality, to which in former times it was intended to be entirely subservient. There has been a marked progress from the general to the special; from abstractions, in which experience is vaguely summed up, to pictures of actual men and women of decided individuality. Still, however, the drama is sufficiently narrow to be almost completely within the scope of one great poet. The field occupied by Shakespeare appears to us to be of immense extent. He seems to have been conversant with every phase of human feeling. And no doubt the wonder and admiration with which we regard him is in a great measure just. But we must not forget that we are apt often to attribute to Shakespeare that which is in reality a modern interpretation of what he wrote; we are apt to consider that to have existed actually in his thoughts which can only really be said to have existed there potentially; his writings contain indeed the germs of much of our nineteenth century thought, but we require to be reminded that they were as yet only germs, that they had not the full meaning for Shakespeare and his contemporaries that they possess now for us. We must remember also that the range of Shakespeare's plays is almost co-extensive with that of the whole dramatic art of his age; it can hardly be said that any important species of it which we find in the writings of his contemporaries in England is altogether outside of his.

Turning to the dramatic productions of our own time, we see at once how vast a progress in speciality has taken place. It is no longer possible for man—it would be impossible even for a second Shakespeare—to cover the ground that the drama has now appropriated to itself. Setting aside the novel with its many varieties—the historical novel, the novel of society high and low, the political novel, the religious novel, and the rest, all of which may be regarded as in a great degree developments to be traced in their origin to the Elizabethan drama—we have not only tragedies, melodramas, comedies of many kinds, farces, burlesques, extravaganzas, written for representation upon the stage, but we have also writings essentially dramatic but not intended for production at all—such, for example as Shelley's "Prometheus," Landor's "Imaginary Conversations" and "Acts and Scenes," and Mr. Browning's Dramatic Lyrics, which are, as he says, "though often lyric in expression, always dramatic in principle, being so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine."

It is true that our literature has not had an isolated development. Many ideas and many forms of expression have come to us from distant ages and from different countries (Greece, Italy, France, and Germany have all done something to modify our art, giving us new matter to assimilate, new methods to imitate, alien laws of criticism to amplify and determine our own. Examples are scarcely wanted to show how deeply the ever-increasing desire to understand and imitate early or foreign modes of thought has influenced the writings of our modern English poets. Mr. Matthew Arnold, by insisting on Greek ideas of beauty; Mr. Rossetti, by directing our attention to early Italian art; Mr. Swinburne, with his admiration for the poetry of Mr. Browning, who says:—

"Open my heart and you will see  
Gravely inside of it, Italy,  
Such love as old Italy had she";

all of these have tended to increase, by the introduction of foreign elements, this development of English poetry by differentiation, and to lay the foundation for a more rapid development of the same in the future. However we may attempt to account for it, the fact is obvious. The versatility which astonishes us in the men of the Renaissance is no longer in the same sense and in the same degree possible. Leonardo da Vinci, who seemed in his age to be master of all arts and all sciences, could not in the nineteenth century be a master in more than one or two. The modern poet, if he would be successful, must be content to confine his energies within a comparatively limited field; he will listen with sympathy to the half-melancholy, half-exulting words of Mr. Browning:—

"I shall never, in the years remaining,  
Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,  
Make you music that should all express me;  
So it seems: I stand on my attainment;  
This, or worse alone, may I give you:  
Verse and nothing else have I to give you,  
Other heights in other lives, God willing."

And he will be satisfied with the share that is given him in the development of what in its entirety is so vast. If we turn now to the

stage, we find that the histrionic art has had a development far inferior to that of the drama. We have indeed transformed the theatre itself into something very different from the rude building in which the plays of Shakespeare were at first acted. There has been a great improvement in scenery, in dresses, in the whole of the paraphernalia of the stage. But in the acting we have made but little progress. We have perhaps got rid in some measure of the stiff declamation of earlier actors; we expect that women shall undertake the female parts; but we cannot be said on the whole to have added much to what is expressed or implied in "Hamlet's" advice to the players. The inference is clear. The English drama has grown too wide to bear any longer throughout a direct reference to the stage. Our best tragedies—in which the poet interprets to us the most subtle and delicate phenomena of human nature—are now either not written for the stage at all, or, if written for the stage and produced upon it, are in most cases complete failures. Our great poets have, as we have said, so specialized their energies that they must necessarily write only, or at any rate in the first place, for the few. The stage, on the other hand, requires that which shall especially appeal to the many. And so it seems that the stage has ceased to be an adequate exponent of the highest kinds of dramatic poetry, the cause being, not that the drama has deteriorated, but that its development has been more rapid than that of the histrionic art.

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The trade offering necessitates a large addition, outlay for rolling stock, to afford full facilities for its prompt transaction, the present rolling stock not being sufficient to accommodate the trade.  
**WM. PAINTER & CO.,**  
BANKERS,  
No. 36 South THIRD Street,  
PHILADELPHIA.

**FINANCIAL.**  
**Wilmington and Reading**  
**RAILROAD**  
**Seven Per Cent. Bonds,**  
FREE OF TAXES.  
We are offering \$200,000 of the Second Mortgage Bonds of this Company  
**AT 82 1/2 AND ACCRUED INTEREST**  
For the convenience of Investors these bonds issued in denominations of  
**\$1000s, \$500s, and \$100s.**  
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No. 36 South THIRD Street,  
PHILADELPHIA.

**SHIPPING.**  
**LORILLARD STEAMSHIP COMPANY**  
**FOR NEW YORK,**  
SAILING EVERY TUESDAY, THURSDAY, AND SATURDAY.  
RATES TEN CENTS PER 100 POUNDS, FOUR CENTS PER CUBIC FOOT, ONE CENT PER GALLON, SHIPS OPTION.  
INSURANCE BY THIS LINE ONE-EIGHTH OF ONE PER CENT.  
Extra rates on small packages from metals, etc. No receipt or bill of lading signed for less than fifty cents.  
Goods forwarded to all points free of commissions. Through bills of lading given to Wilmington, N. C., by the steamers of this line leaving New York tri-weekly. For further particulars apply to  
JOHN F. OHT,  
PIER 19 NORTH WHARVES,  
N. B.—The regular shippers by this line will be charged the above rates at winter.  
Whitener commence December 15. 2 2 1

**THE REGULAR STEAMSHIPS ON THE PHILADELPHIA AND CHARLESTON STEAMSHIP LINE ARE AUTHORIZED TO ISSUE THROUGH BILLS OF LADING TO ALL PORTS SOUTH AND WEST IN CONNECTION WITH SOUTH CAROLINA RAILROAD COMPANY.**  
ALFRED L. TYLER,  
Vice-President So. C. R. R. Co.

**PHILADELPHIA AND SOUTHERN**  
**RAILROAD STEAMSHIP COMPANY'S REGU-**  
**LAR SEMI-WEEKLY SERVICE TO NEW OR-**  
**LEANS, LA.**  
The WYOMING will sail for New Orleans, via Havana, on Friday, December 16, at 8 A. M.  
The YAZOO will sail from New Orleans, via Havana, on Thursday, December 23, at 8 A. M.  
THROUGH BILLS OF LADING at as low rates as by any other route. Also, through bills of lading to all points on the Mississippi river between New Orleans and St. Louis. Rates reduced for freight and passengers without charge of commission.  
WEEKLY LINE TO SAVANNAH, GA.  
The TORAWANDA will sail for Savannah on Saturday, December 17, at 8 A. M.  
The WYOMING will sail from Savannah on Saturday, December 17, at 8 A. M.  
THROUGH BILLS OF LADING given to all the principal towns in Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee in connection with the Central Railroad of Georgia, Atlantic and Gulf Railroad, and Florida steamers, at as low rates as by competing lines.  
SEMI-MONTHLY LINE TO WILMINGTON, N. C.  
The PIONEER will sail for Wilmington on Tuesday, December 13, at 8 A. M. Returning, will leave Wilmington on Saturday, December 20, at 8 A. M.  
Connects with the Cape Fear River Steamboat Company, the Wilmington and Northern Railroad, and the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad to all interior points.  
Freights for Columbia, S. C., and Augusta, Ga., taken via Wilmington, at as low rates as by any other route.  
Insurance on goods shipped by this line reduced. Bills of lading signed at Queen street wharf on or before day of sailing.  
WILLIAM J. JAMES, General Agent,  
No. 120 South THIRD Street.

**FOR LIVERPOOL AND QUEEN-**  
**TOWN.—Iman Line of Royal Mail**  
Steamers are appointed to sail as follows:  
City of Paris, Saturday, Dec. 17, at 1 P. M.  
City of London, Saturday, Dec. 24, at 7 A. M.  
City of Cork, via Halifax, Tuesday, Dec. 27, at 9 A. M.  
City of Brooklyn, Saturday, Dec. 31, at 1 P. M.  
and each succeeding Saturday and alternate Tuesday, from pier No. 45 North wharf at the company's office.  
RATES OF PASSAGE.  
Payable in gold. Payable in currency.  
First Cabin..... \$75 Steerage..... \$3  
To Liverpool.....